

ARCHAEOLOGY PAPERS

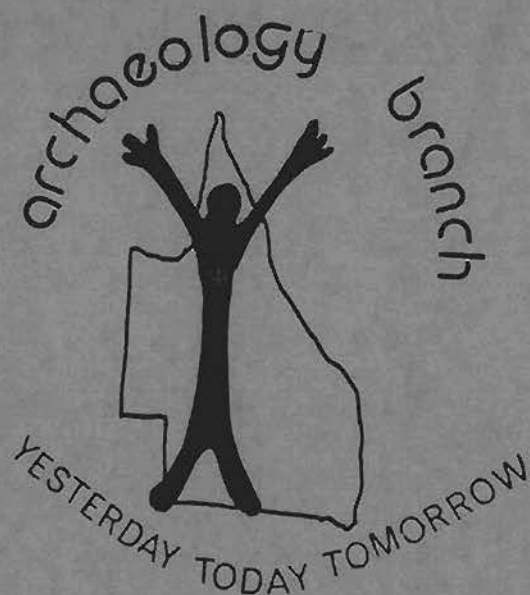
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ARCHAEOLOGY BRANCH
*Département of Aboriginal and
Islanders Advancement*

CONTENTS:

SOME MATERIAL CULTURE OF
THE NORTH EAST
QUEENSLAND RAINFOREST
by
Frank P. Woolston



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NO. 14

NOTES ON AUTHOR

Frank Woolston is by profession an optometrist (now retired) with a long term and sincere interest in Anthropological and Archaeological research. With Mr. Stan Colliver of Brisbane, he has done much to ensure the accurate recording of data relating to Aboriginal cultural heritage.

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SOME MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE NORTH EAST
QUEENSLAND ABORIGINES

by

F.P. Woolston

*(inside cover - notes on author).

There are two high rainfall areas of the Tropical Coast of North Queensland which are covered by rainforest both lowland and tableland in type. The areas are Pasco River to Princess Charlotte Bay and from Cooktown to south of Townsville. In this latter section much of the lowland type has been cleared to grow sugar cane and much of the tableland type to grow maize - there are certain areas retained as National Parks, Aboriginal Reserves and Forestry Reserves.

The country under discussion extends roughly from Cooktown to Townsville and inland to the coastal and Dividing ranges. The highest mountains in Queensland; Bartle Frere and Bellenden Ker, both over 5,800 feet (1,700m) with a backing of massive tableland, form roughly the centre of this rainforest area, and within this region all of the rivers are short, with the exception perhaps of the Herbert and Ingham and in the wet season, fast flowing. Some near-coastal Islands, e.g. Dunk and Hinchinbrook, are also included within the rainforest region.

Until recent times much of this area was inhabited by Aboriginal tribes apparently different in general appearance and certainly different in culture from the better known Aborigines of the open country.

The tribes were small numerically and occupied small areas while languages varied considerably, e.g. four different words for cassowary were used between the Barron and Russell Rivers. Only a small number of these people are still living, mostly on farms and Aboriginal Reserves with a few still living on their tribal lands, e.g. Murray Upper and Tully.

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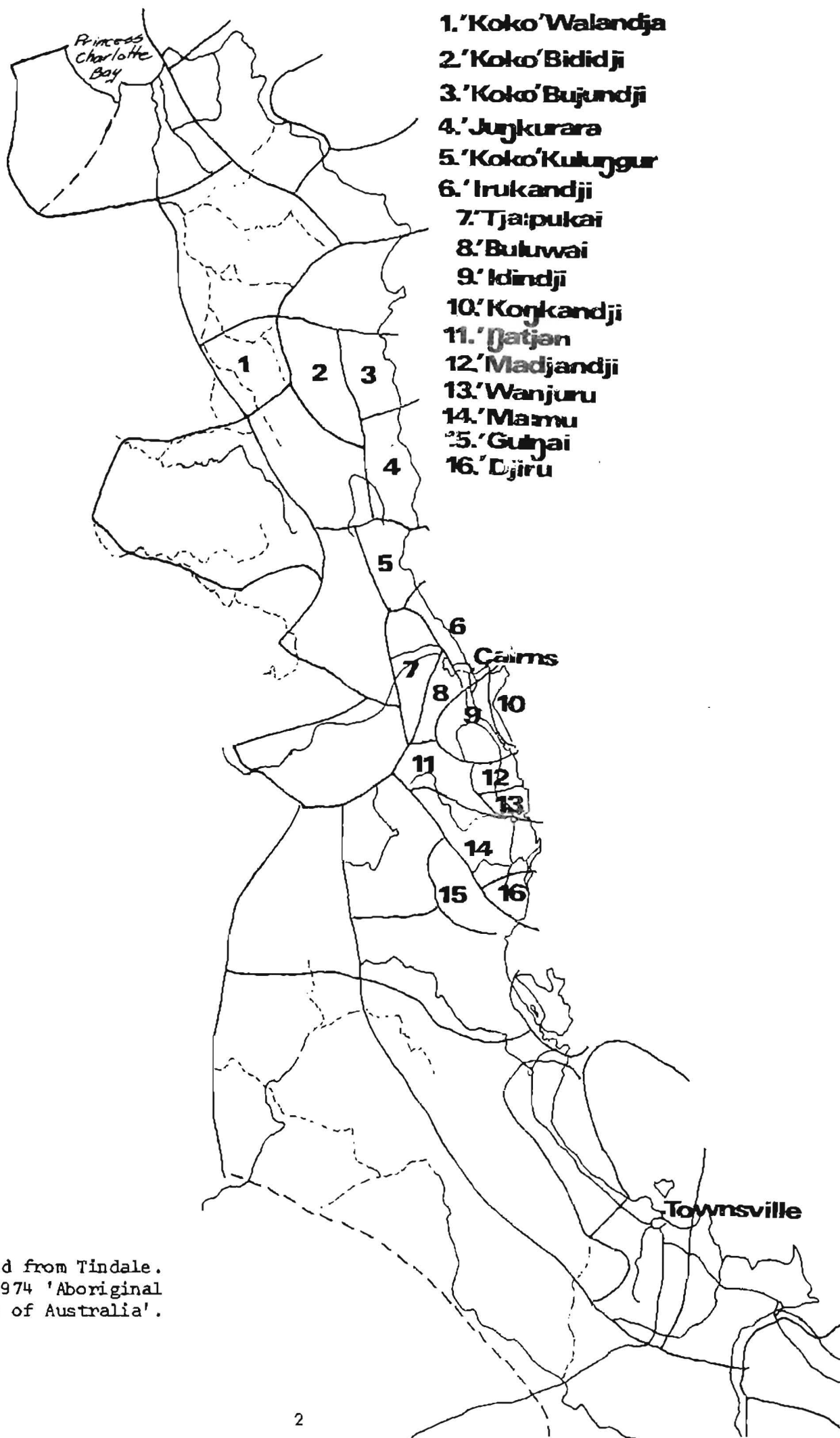
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Derived from Tindale.
N.B. 1974 'Aboriginal
Tribes of Australia'.

From the photographs I have seen, especially those taken by Alfred Atkinson, one of the first photographers in North Queensland, the people seem to vary considerably in stature and therefore we cannot say they were all small people.

The rainforests were areas low in animal protein and consequently vegetable resources made up the bulk of their diet (Jack 1888:1; Meston 1889:8; Bailey 1907). Thus many of the artefacts were developed for the processing of plant products.

Meston, accompanied by the botanist Bailey, in 1889 listed 20 nuts, 30 fruits, 8 beans, 3 yams and 4 figs, constituting a major part of the diet for the Bellenden Ker Aborigines.

Wood, bark, cane, string, etc., were used to produce artefacts typical of the area and quite different from types away from the rainforest. (Fig. 1).

Finely finished cane baskets of various sizes and always of the same shape were constructed. They utilized supple lawyer cane for this purpose and from the same material made fish traps - great long pointed cylinders which they placed in the shallow streams. From the inner bark of the fig tree they made strong heavy twine with which they then constructed turkey nets. These were stretched over hoops of cane which were set over the tracks of the turkeys. The nets were baited with fruit of some kind and the turkeys were called to the spot by the women.



FIG. 1

Aboriginal campsite and artefacts, Herbert River, North Queensland.

A rainforest shield can be seen on the right of the photo.

(Photograph courtesy of the Oxley Library, No. 8978)

They developed nut stones (anvils) and nut hammers for cracking the numerous kinds of hard nuts, the kernels of which were processed, if necessary, by roasting and leaching in water to remove toxic substances.



FIG. 2

A "Morah" Stone.
(Photo F. Woolston).

I would like to explain the use of two of the main utility objects which were used in the rainforest area. These are the "Morah", a flat oval shaped stone with transverse grooves cut in to the slate from which it is made, (Fig. 2) and the "Moogi", which is a natural pebble so chosen for its shape, and used with a crushing rolling action on nut kernels which had been treated and cracked from the shell. The end of the 'Moogi' was used as a hammer stone first to lightly break the kernels and the 'Morah' was placed on a bark blanket. The operator was a woman who sat, one leg bent and the other extended, with a pile of kernels to one side of her. She broke them with the 'Moogi' on the 'Morah', then crushed and rolled the whole mass. The nut meal thus produced spilled over the far edge of the 'Morah' and heaped up on the blanket.



FIG. 3

A Nutcracking Stone.
(Photo F. Woolston).

The finishing of some of the stone implements such as a "Morah" (for grinding nut meal) was equal to, if not better than, any other part of the Continent. In some cases there was decoration on these stones, and bear in mind that these were functional and not ceremonial objects.

The most common nut in the whole area was the walnut bean or black walnut, *Endianda palmerstoni*, called "tekkel" or "coohey", or the yellow walnut, "kunkee".

Originally these mountain people had no missile weapons with the exception of stones. They used clubs and the great heavy wooden swords and the defence against these weapons was a large bossed shield. They also used stone axes and these are the biggest of their kind found in Australia, e.g. Queensland Museum Specimen QE. 2313 is 49 X 33 cm with a weight of 7 kilograms.

Around the estuaries and on the beach the people supported themselves mostly by fishing, and there were a number of methods of sea travel recorded. They sometimes crossed streams by using their big shields as a float for their goods or by using lengths of wild banana stems lashed and spiked together. Logs were also used in lieu of banana stems. Dugout canoes with outriggers were recorded from these areas. (Fig. 4).



FIG. 4

Ethnographic Photo courtesy of Oxley Library, Queensland.
No. 8981. This photo would have been taken in the late
1800's

The men were adept at climbing to obtain possums or bees nests, and occasionally snakes curled up in the great masses of tree ferns. They cooked these by using heated stones. It is also recorded that they collected vast quantities of nuts and kept them in circular bark containers for a future food supply.

They made large water-tight grass or palm leaf huts, which were usually placed in a position on the bend of a river or creek so as to allow a maximum amount of sunshine on them. This was because of the intense rainfall and the

FIG. 5



Native Mia Mias, North Queensland.

Campsite, North Queensland. Note the baskets in the foreground.
(Ethnographic photo courtesy of Oxley Library No. 8979. This
photo would have been taken in the late 1800's).

ever present dampness. In some cases great areas, up to several acres, of the rainforest itself were cleared and the huts were then placed around the perimeter. The centre was always kept clear for dancing and fighting or the settlement of disputes which were usually over women. During the dry season these people often made temporary huts in the sandy creek beds.

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FURTHER READING

A more detailed discussion of stone artefacts from North Queensland rain-forests is available in :-

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